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ABSTRACT

This paper brings the perceptions of a social psychologist to bear on curricula as currently taught in the schools. Many discussions of the school curriculum hinge upon the questions what, when, and how, and leave the most important why question unasked and unanswered, perhaps because it is so difficult to answer. In contrast to such theoretical concerns, practical consideration of the social psychological constraints upon the curriculum suggests that the curriculum is primarily influenced by the following five factors: (1) the entering characteristics of the learners; (2) the nature of the subject material; (3) educational aims and instructional objectives; (4) personality variables of the teacher; and (5) the organization of plant and personnel (i.e., communication structures and the social psychology of the institution). In England, and to a small extent in North America, it would seem that primary/elementary schools have, by and large, been fairly successful in accommodating influences one and five. Primary schools have not done particularly well in respect to influences two and three. Features grouped under influence four still need a great deal more research before even the crudest of generalizations can be made about their effect upon curriculum. However, it is apparent that the self concepts of teachers and students have marked implications for learning and curriculum planning. (Author/RH)

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School Curricula: A Social-Psychological View

by Philip Gammage

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Schooling is concerned with transmitting what society believes should be learned. Its main purpose is to "exchange ideas, resources and people through a network of communication systems. The curriculum as taught is an example of such a communication system" (Skilbeck, 1976). But, as everyone knows, schooling is also used as a form of social control, a distributor of life-chances. Added to which, as Silberman (1970) said, the teacher is concerned with much that does not exist in hard concrete forms: with procedures, with attitudes and feelings which act as mediators in the moving and changing process of socialization.

The socialization of the young, however, is not a one-way process, and education -- as one part of the socialization process -- is interpreted, selected from, adjusted to and internalized on the basis of the experience of the learner. That is, one not only teaches some thing, but some one. What is presented, the curriculum, has a transactional nature.

Curriculum arises from a history of perceptions of child-rearing and of culture; it operates within particular institutions which have real people as staff; it operates with today's children, not yesterday's; and it is institutionalized and ritualized as an artifact of the culture. Social psychology focuses on the interactions between individual psychology and social systems. It is the purpose of this paper to bring the perceptions of a social psychologist to bear on curricula as currently taught to individuals and by individuals within the school system.

Much of what is taught in schools may strike one as hardly worth knowing as a child, let alone as an adult. Once, when I was a sixth-former, one of my friends studying economics estimated that 90% of what he was learning and had been learning over the past two years either was out of date, in strict utilitarian terms, or was related to the immediate goal of passing examinations. Now, of course, he could have been wrong - and children's views of what is useful are not the only

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criteria to employ by any means. Indeed, I would wish to strongly assert that a curriculum should always include opportunity to study the "useless" as well as the useful.

Many people take an extremely "means-to-ends" view of the curriculum. They see the curriculum in the same way that they view an assembly line process in a factory. They apply the same criteria. Does the "product" sell; is it good value for the money? They take the view that education is of little or no value in itself. It leads somewhere; it gets you something. It makes you richer, it gives you prestige, or it (at very least) meets an expressed societal need. If it doesn't meet any of these requirements, you scrap it. Such views are often "heady" and persuasive stuff. Moreover, they fall into place with many an adolescent's views of relevance. Of themselves these views can lend great weight in the shaping of a curriculum. But of themselves they can easily become materialistic, shallow and mis-educative. I believe the curriculum in most schools represents at best an uneasy compromise between on one hand, the "cultural repository," traditional and ritualistic time-filling, utilitarian possibility and, on the other hand, idiosyncratic, teacher-originated academic hobbies.

A teacher walking into the classroom is usually credited with knowing what ideas she or he hopes to deal with in the ensuing session. Experienced teachers will probably be acutely aware of the problems and pitfalls likely to occur in the sequencing of ideas. Such teachers will be aware of the constant need to be monitoring the response of pupils in order to alter and modify the level and "fit" of the material. Experienced teachers will be well aware that the shaping of much of the curriculum lies outside their hands. There are constraints upon teachers, upon their presentation and upon their pupils' reception of their ideas. No matter how varied the

pedagogical style, how attractive the packaging of knowledge, the content will be to a large extent determined by many factors totally beyond the teacher's control. For instance, the knowledge the teacher deals in will clearly be, at least in part, a portion of some existing cultural repository. It will have been shaped, altered, explored and redefined by many minds and many social processes. Neither a particular subject nor the total school curriculum just "happens." Both depend upon a complex mixture of factors which interact in any given society. Those factors which influence the teacher's transactions with his or her pupils can be thought of simplistically in terms of relative immediacy in impact or of distance. Mr. Jones, in teaching classics on a Friday afternoon to a class of bored fifteen-year-olds, is likely to be most immediately concerned with holding their attention by convincing them of the utility of the subject or simply of the importance of "meal tickets" earned by passing examinations. He may wish to focus enthusiasm and encourage interest in aesthetic form for its own sake, but unless he is extremely lucky, the immediate constraints will dominate, and the lessons will be valued for pragmatic considerations rather than as part of long-term learning. Additionally, and as is well known, any school curriculum as a whole will have been subjected to manipulation and reshaping as socially validated knowledge. Mr. Jones' Latin lessons, while still regarded as useful bases for further education, will for the most part be disregarded and only endured as prerequisite to professional entry or access to further education. In short, his Latin lessons will be considered by pupils, as well as by society at large, as having less immediate or obvious validity than, say, physics or mathematics, since the apparent instrumental use of the subject matter usually has some considerable bearing upon attitudes adopted towards that subject.

I think that any curriculum must combine hard-nosed analysis (apropos of societal relevance) with utopian imagination. Indeed, it is precisely the balance between those two extremes which is at the heart of most statements of educational aims. It is this balance too, which, in non-authoritarian societies, can so depend upon teacher skills and imagination. As Shipman (1972) has said, eventually the curriculum consists of "accommodation and compromise, a mixture of horse trading and horse sense."

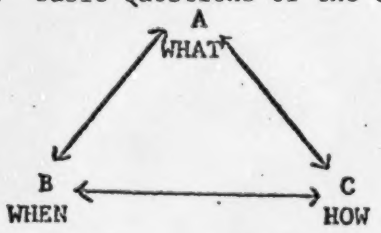
As a large number of educationists have pointed out, even where there is substantial agreement on the core of "teachable units" in a given curriculum, those elements taught are as much affected by the interaction (the transaction between teacher and taught) as they are by the actual content. One important element in the interaction is the teacher's understanding of the children's beliefs and values. Any system of schooling is embedded in a system of belief and values. When such a system is not in harmony with the beliefs and values of the children, or not able to draw upon some of their concerns, the curriculum is in danger of becoming at best ineffective and at worst almost useless. Thus knowledge of the values and attitudes of the children, while not the only information to be heeded, has long been considered essential for devising an effective curriculum.

One of the more disturbing imbalances in curriculum studies which I have noticed over recent years is the tendency for the field to become dominated by sociologists and administrators. In England, the recent thirty or so Open University units on curriculum design and development (E.203 Educational Studies) reflected this domination. In that second level degree course only five percent of the contributions emphasized psychological issues (Gammage, 1976). Of course, to understand the curriculum one must assuredly look at the surrounding cultural, economic and idelogical circusmstances. But one must also look at the "recipients" and "actors"[1] in the learning process. As long ago as 1946, ···>

Jersild (1948) was attempting to apply many of the findings of human development and developmental psychology to specific curriculum problems.

Many discussions of the school curriculum hinge upon three closely interrelated questions. Some writers have seen them as a sort of education "trinity."

Figure 1. Basic Questions of the Curriculum.



Clearly, the "what" is extremely complex. Moreover, it is commonly discussed at two quite fundamentally different levels. Level A(1) concerns the culture as a whole: the purpose of schooling, the role of the school and of the teacher in a given society, as well as political and ideological views of that society's structure. Textbooks abound in this field; some with an avowedly political flavor, such as Dale (1976); some more obviously neutral in tone, such as Lawton (1975); some truly seminal in my opinion, such as Warnock (1977). But such books, while often extremely stimulating, tend, in my experience, to have little effect upon those engaged at the "chalk face." This may be a pity, but the practitioners are more concerned with level A(2), that is, with the "what" regarding the content of a particular program or series of programs in a given type of school. This level is more often dealt with by administrators, learning theorists, subject specialists and curriculum theorists. "Recipe" books abound and appear to be well used (Warwick, 1975; Nicholls and Nicholls, 1978). While there is an obvious interrelationship between A(1) and A(2), as demonstrated for example in Nyrere's (1967) famous paper or in Bronfenbrenner's Two Worlds of Childhood (1970), practicing

teachers can rarely afford the luxury of dwelling for too long on such connections, and they tend to move rapidly from content to timing, to the "when" of the curriculum process.

Indeed, when one makes even the most simplistic analysis of a curriculum in regard to content, one realizes that, for all the many and complex analyses of "what," it is the "when" which has often been the most fruitful factor guiding teachers. Let us examine this in more detail.

Although the "when" inevitably has overtones of both "what" and "how," it is generally discussed in terms of appropriate timing. Indeed, for many teachers of young children this has become the central feature of their curriculum planning, often providing, in limited terms, the rationale and justification for both content and transaction. Traditionally, psychologists have had a considerable amount to contribute here and have attempted to identify key issues. Evans (1975) and others have described such issues in relation to four sub-categories, roughly as follows:

B(1) Sequencing the stages of human development and learning.

Psychologists of very different orientations have a lot to say here. Indeed, this might be regarded as the most fruitful strand in curriculum theory. Its effects on content have been considerable. One thinks immediately of Piaget, Kohlberg, Erkison, or Bruner, and their theories of child learning and socialization which appear to have had a direct effect upon the curriculum (e.g., Nuffield Maths, Science 5-13, The Middle Years Project, Health Education Project, Ypsilanti Language Curriculum, M.A.C.O.S., Nachalot Project, to mention but a few). Clearly, many such curricular packages or proposals have been based on theories of human development currently fashionable and employed as blueprints by the curriculum architects.

B(2) Identifying appropriate learning strategies. Referred to here are those theories relating the cognitive style of the learner to what is being learned. Notions of timing are not so appropriate here but tend to be employed as a part of the total explanation, sometimes with reference to developmental sequences. Though one may find evidence to suggest a considerable amount of research work in this area, I would assert that there has been little direct spin-off for the curriculum as yet.

B(3) Sustaining motivation and enhancing feedback There is much diverse work by psychologists here. The principal theorists have been behaviorists; but among other major contributors have been some very differently oriented social psychologists, and even some psychodynamically orientated educationists, notably Morris (1972). Here, some of the Schools Council English/Humanities work is clearly also relevant. Several English Local Educational Authorities have recently concentrated on the issue, proposing revised systems of diagnosis and recording in the primary school (currently of the profile or log type).

B(4) Isolating logical sequences of hierarchies within the structure of the subject, discipline, or area to be learned. Gagné (1969) is one of the noted theorists here. His ideas concerning task analysis-taxonomy approaches to instruction (and it should be emphasized that Gagné sees instruction as only one aspect of education) center upon the arrangement of conditions which facilitate learning in regard to both vertical and lateral transfer. There are other theorists (particularly

in the U.S.) who hold that task analysis yields suggestions concerning the appropriate sequencing and structuring of the material to be learned. As Gagné (1969) has pointed out, this is not a new idea. Its bases go back to Herbart and earlier. It is an eclectic theory drawing on work as diverse as that of Thorndike, Piaget and Pavlov.

Closely connected with the "what" and "when" is the question of "how" one carries out the transactions with the child. This does, of course, throw one back to considerations of the child's levels of cognitive development and sophistication. Teaching methods which appear suitable at one stage may not necessarily be suitable at the next. In this respect it may strike one as somewhat strange that, in England, one is likely to observe young children choosing, organizing, and selecting their learning experiences and sometimes even the material to be employed, while at secondary and higher[2] levels dictactic exposition and limited student choice are often the order of the day. Overall this is an aspect of the curriculum in which relationships and the quality of the transactions are coming more and more under scrutiny, an area where mutuality (to use Morris's term) has become of major interest to curriculum theorists and educationists in general.

Often, the most fundamental of all questions about the curriculum -- "why?" is left unasked and unanswered. Notably, it is omitted in most official pronouncements because it is so difficult to answer. Why teach this or that? Why this content as opposed to that? Why this timing as opposed to that? Why this method as opposed to that? Furthermore, the "why" of the curriculum underscores one of the major conflicts in the rationale for education with respect to both content and method. The two conflicting rationales are perhaps best set out as follows.

According to one view, education, and hence by implication the curriculum, is primarily concerned with preparing children to serve the future society. Hence, the immediate needs and interests of children must recieve secondary consideration to projected societal needs. Put in its extreme form, as Stalin is reported to have said to H. G. Wells, education is a "weapon" and teachers hold the front line in the battle for the mind and thus for the support of a certain sort of societal structure. Clearly, the line between indoctrination and education becomes very tenuous here. It is hard not to see the force of such views when reading the educational pronouncements of developing nations, or even when reading, for instance, the preambles to English Education Acts.

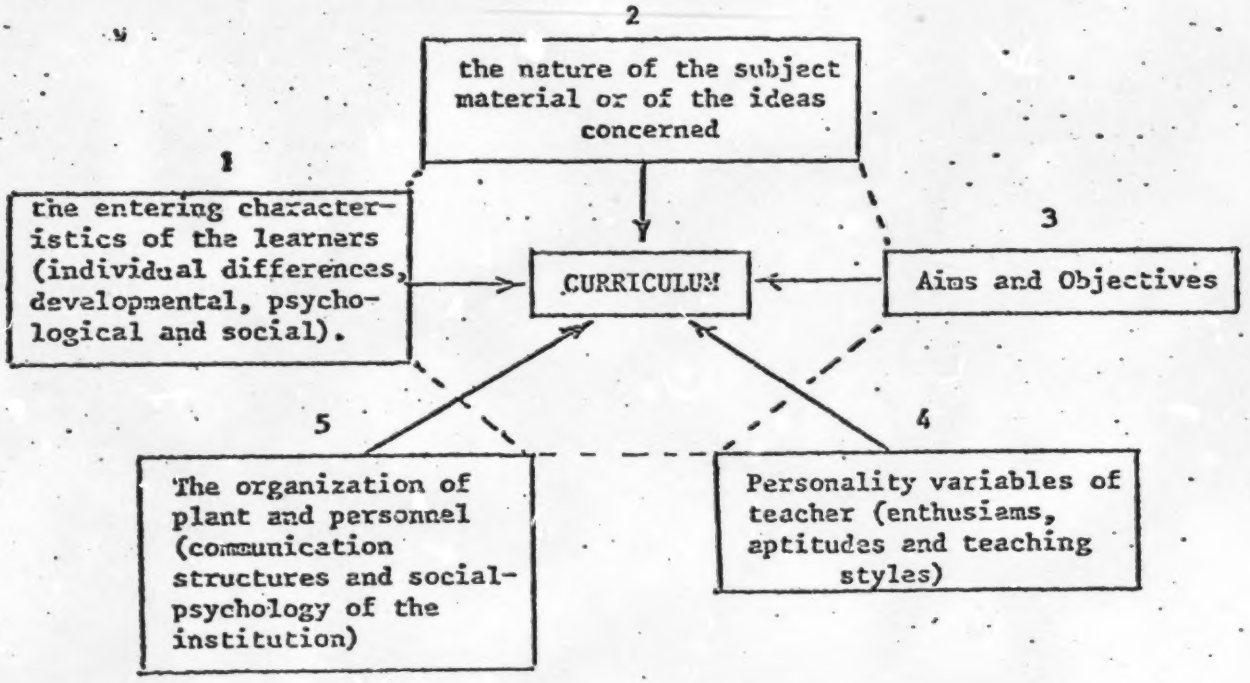
Opposing such a perspective are those who believe that education should be based on the immediate needs and interests of children; that is, that subsequent responsibilities and societal needs should be subordinated to the child's needs. For the curriculum to be effective, they argue, both content and transaction must be in tune with the potentialities of the individual.

Clearly the first view, in its extreme form, underlies a curriculum based upon an analysis of what a society requires generally in order to succeed or to provide for "satisfactory" adult role-playing. Such views are often, though by no means always, concomitant with overt politicization. Sometimes, as is the case of Freire's methods in Brazil in the early 1960's, education and particular curricula are used as tools for the expansion of political consciousness, for what Freire termed concientizacao or "consciousness raising." (Stress upon group identity, allegiance and duty are, however, the more usual forms of politicization; see Bronfenbrenner, 1970, op. cit.).

The second view is based upon the assumption that a "full" and "complete" daily existence during childhood is the best insurance for successful adulthood (a view with which I have some sympathy and one which gains a measure of support from various branches of psychology and even from biography). Great problems lie beneath such child centered assumptions, however. What are the real 'needs' of children? Who assesses them? How are they perceived?

In all, and putting aside the bulk of curriculum theory, any practical consideration of the social psychological constraints upon the curriculum would lead me to believe that the prime influences upon the curriculum are those depicted in the following diagram.

Figure 2. Primary Factors Affecting the Curriculum


2
the nature of the subject material or of the ideas concerned
1
the entering characteristics of the learners (individual differences, developmental, psychological and social).
CURRICULUM
3
Aims and Objectives
5
The organization of plant and personnel (communication structures and social-psychology of the institution)
4
Personality variables of teacher (enthusiams, aptitudes and teaching styles)

Note

Broken lines represent possible interaction

Solid lines represent major pressures

In England, and to a small extent in North America, it would seem that primary/elementary schools have, by and large, been fairly successful in accommodating influences one and five. This is partly because such schools are relatively small and intimate (the average English urban primary school has about ten to twelve staff members); partly it is an outcome of the long traditions of nonspecialist and polymathic teaching in such schools. Both factors have contributed to less parochialism in individual areas of the curriculum than is usually possible at later, more specialized stages of education. In such small schools the communication structure is much more informal than in secondary schools. If decisions concerning changes in pedagogy, style and content are required, these can be effected quickly and simply. Different class groupings, team teaching, the sharing of common core "subject" concerns, all combine to produce less protective attitudes on the part of the teachers towards every particular curriculum subject. Added to this "looser framing" (see Bernstein, 1971) are what many infant and kindergarten teachers would describe as the "facts of life," that children come to reception classes or first grades at such obviously diverse ability levels within a given curriculum. All this invites and indeed compels the primary teacher to concentrate continually upon the facilitation of <u>differential access</u> to the curriculum for different children within the same class or group. Additionally, and especially in English Primary Schools, traditions of "learning alongside the child" affect the role of the teacher so that his or her position is not that of the "fountainhead," sprinkling each child equally, nor that of the "expert" whose expertise would be diminished by exploration or admissions of uncertainty. Rather, the primary teacher's talents, as Wilson (1962) put it, are spread pretty thinly, and modern teaching styles constantly tend to reinforce an awareness of width

and shallowness, rather than of depth.

It could be said, however, that primary schools have not done particularly well in respect to influences two and three. Frequently there has been weak or ineffective analysis of the discipline or knowledge area being taught. There have been some suggestions, too, that certain aspects of the curriculum are not as systematically developed as they might be -- math, geography and history being commonly cited, especially in connection with the more able child.[3] Some general concern has been expressed as to whether modern methods, such as integrated-day approaches, ensure sufficient development of the core curriculum; and in math in particular there is evidence, as shown in Land's (1963) early work and through the more recent work of Griffiths (1974), that the subject is not particularly well handled in the primary schools. Often, too, aims and objectives are expressed in vague and general terms such that translation to the day-to-day "system maintenance" of the school becomes well nigh impossible.

By 1979, all English Local Education Authorities, through their Advisory or Inspectorate services, had instituted working parties to carry out more careful analysis and evaluation with respect to influences one, two and three, and cumulative core subject profiles were already beginning to bear upon the shaping of basic skills curricula more directly (noticeably in Oxfordshire, in the Inner London Education Authority, in the counties of Avon, Wiltshire and Somersetshire, as well as in many others.) Even in the "ad hoc" and highly differentiated provision of pre-school curricula (ages 2 to 5 years) the British Association of Early Childhood Education recommended (August, 1979) that their organization take steps to fund projects focusing research on more systematic early childhood curricula. The Department of Education Assessment and Performance Unit (A.P.U., established by the Department of Education and Science, 1975), somewhat akin to the American N.A.E.P., is likewise seriously occupied in the feasibility of more careful guidance and monitoring of the curriculum in middle childhood and adolescence. Norm- and criterion-referenced assessment are under active consideration. Both the Schools Council and the Regional Boards have also set up inquiries into, or courses on, assessment techniques (Macintosh, 1978).

Accountability, continuity, and transfer from one stage of education to another have been serious concerns of both the recent Department of Education and Science major reports (D.E.S., 1978, 1979); and the earlier report underlines that one of the prime aims of the primary schools must be to ensure that curricula form a firm basis for succeeding stages, particularly in regard to basic skills. Articulation of the curriculum therefore becomes an especially dominant theme in math, functional literacy and science.

Education for children past puberty has, in both England and North America, emphasized a gradually increasing specialization[4] in its approach. Consequently, such traditions, when combined with greater specialist knowledge of the teachers and the preoccupation with accreditation in terms of examinations (the "tickets" to success in most advanced technological societies), have led to greater success in the curriculum when dealing with influences two and three. However, in my limited experience in a variety of countries (the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Spain, Australia) secondary stages of education have been woefully weak in providing differential access to the curriculum. "Rolling" timetables, variable time/subject commitments, free choice and curricular "width" are not commonly experienced by the thirteen to sixteen year old adolescent. Frequently, such a child is still "grouped," "set" or "streamed" according to ability, or according to a restricted choice of specialization and combination of subjects. Indeed, in the large comprehensive, collegiate or high school, there are many factors operating within the organization which make curriculum flexibility and differential access almost impossible to achieve. Communication structures become channelled and hierarchized, traditions and subject validation harden, and most students sit through identical portions or "gobbets"[5] of the subject. The different entering characteristics of the many students from a variety of primary institutions are not acknowledged except in the crudest of groupings. Those of us who are familiar with the problems of resource and remedial teachers, with the difficulties encountered by teachers of new subject areas (such as consumer education) are well aware that the introduction of a different aspect of the curriculum into an already frozen, crowded and competitive situation may well lead to despair and conflict

among the staff.

Those omnibus features grouped under influence four still need a great deal more research before even the crudest of generalizations can be made about their effect upon the curriculum. Mutuality, concern, involvement, charisma, styles and approaches, all affect the classroom climate to a great extent. We know that they can be important, but to what degree and in what context we know less. There is a long tradition of research in this area, but little conclusive to report, beyond the rather trite reiteration that, in the last resort, what teachers teach is themselves, not the subject. It is interesting to note that (after a period of apparent disenchantment with psychodynamics and ego-psychology) college courses -- at least those which I examined in England and some of those I observed in North America -- are beginning to focus on the models of healthy personality as discussed in the theories of Allport, Maslow, Rogers, Fromm and others. Maslow's theories, in particular, seem to form a prominent part of educational and social psychology courses for teachers. Most teachers are at least minimally aware of the work of Coopersmith (1967), Gordon (1966), and Gergen (1971), and possibly of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). If the self concept is as important as such writers would have us believe, then it clearly has great implication for learning and for curriculum planning. Certainly a major aim in any curriculum construction should be to provide chances of success for the child. How can children feel able unless they succeed? How will they go on learning in the face of repeated failure? If children develop the self concept through interaction with those around them, then clearly teachers are needed who are capable of understanding and perceiving both their own and the child's views of the world.

In all, any social-psychological approach must serve to remind us of the context and process of interaction, of the competing forces in the socializing of the child. It must emphasize that school is concerned with socialization, and it must remind us that socialization is about the attitudes, feelings and emotions of the person, as well as about the individual's cognitive construction of the world. But such as approach must also serve to remind us that socialization

tends towards conservation and the confirmation of existing norms, values, and social roles. By implication, learning and hence the curriculum in schools is not merely the process of absorbing and storing facts; it is a part of human development, the development of the learners as persons. Thus, one returns to the point of emphasis in any social-psychological consideration of the curriculum. Knowledge transmitted is not necessarily knowledge received. To undertake transmission without reflecting on and attempting to ascertain the perceptions of the learner is to engage in grossly incomplete forms of curriculum planning. Image and perception are not necessarily congruent. The entering characteristics of the learners are vital ingredients, possibly the most vital ingredients, in the production of meaningful, well matched, well designed school learning.[6] I would be happier if current tomes on curriculum theory expressed this more clearly.

NOTES

1. For instance, and to pursue the example given earlier, it is common for people to ascribe like or dislike for particular subject areas and for their associated success or failure in terms concerning their perceptions of the teacher: i.e., "I didn't get on with Latin because the teacher didn't like me, was unpleasant, etc."

2. It has always struck me as rather curious that curriculum "theory" for the most part centres upon school rather than upon institutions of further and higher education. Is this part of the tradition that teachers of students over the age of eighteen need no pedagogical training, while teachers of young children and adolescents do?

3. D.E.S. (The Bullock Report) A Language for Life, H.M.S.O. 1975.

   Society makes its most conscious and concerted attempt at developing children's attitudes and beliefs through the school curriculum. These are made through policy documents centrally inspired "guide lines" and discussion papers (such as D.E.S. paper on the Curriculum, Four Subjects for Debate H.M.S.O. 1977), through systems of license and inspection, through local or provincial advisory systems, through public and externally validated examinations, through teacher training courses and text-books, through research and development bodies (such as the Schools Council in the U.K.).

4. In North America there is much greater emphasis on vocational aspects of education, particularly for age groups of sixteen years onward in the Collegiate and Senior High Schools.

5. A process of sprinkling from a fountainhead, or of attempting to "wet each child equally," as a colleague put it.

6. See especially the work of Good, L., Biddle, B. and Brophy, J. Teachers Make a Difference, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975, where, in referring to various studies of teacher effectiveness, they report work showing that different styles, methodologies and structures are required for different types of pupils at different age levels. And say "in general it appears that indirect teaching is probably effective, but only after students have mastered the fundamental tool skills and work habits required to assume responsibility for undertaking and maintaining their own learning efforts" (Ibid p.76). And I quote:"the findings suggest that low SES students with minimal skills will progress most rapidly in the early grades in a carefully planned and teacher structured learning enviornment.....It should be noted, however, that although this appears the best initial strategy for teaching such students, the strategy becomes less effective to the extent that it succeeds!" (p.78).

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